City sees drop in murder rate, but not in South Side’s Englewood
By Frank Main
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If you look at Englewood, you might think violence is spiraling out of control in Chicago.

Week after week, the South Side neighborhood has been ground zero for harrowing crimes like Tuesday’s mass shooting at a fast-food restaurant that left two dead and five wounded. This year, 56 people were killed in Englewood through Tuesday — a 40 percent increase over the same period in 2010.

Citywide, though, murder was down more than 2 percent this year, and overall crime dropped 8 percent.

“If you live in a very dangerous neighborhood, you’re still seeing a lot of crime,” said Arthur Lurigio, a criminal justice professor and associate dean at Loyola University. “But the truth is that we’re safer now than we were 40 years ago.”

Chicago’s crime rates are at their lowest in decades. There were more than 800 murders in Chicago in 1970, compared to 419 this year through Tuesday and 437 through all of 2010.

Other big cities like New York and Los Angeles have seen even more dramatic reductions in crime. New York’s murder rate is a third of Chicago’s, and Los Angeles’ murder rate is about half of ours.

“The goal is zero,” police Supt. Garry McCarthy said. “When I stop hearing about kids getting killed, when I stop hearing about kids getting shot, then maybe I’ll be satisfied.”

McCarthy said he is not happy with this year’s murder totals but believes the department is responding to new strategies he put into place since he took office in May.

Of nine categories of major crimes, the only ones to increase this year were aggravated sexual assault and motor vehicle theft, McCarthy said. They both rose slightly, he said.

“We brought a new playbook,” he said. “It takes some time.”

Over the past seven months, McCarthy has carried out Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s campaign promise to shift about 1,000 officers to the patrol division. They were moved to the city’s 25 districts from desk jobs and citywide crime-fighting units that McCarthy has disbanded.

The Fraternal Order of Police called the redeployment a “shell game,” saying the city should hire more officers instead of shifting them from one unit to another.
McCarthy said a key to his crime-fighting philosophy is giving district commanders more autonomy. They are held accountable through a process called CompStat, which was started in New York in the 1990s.

Under CompStat, the department provides commanders with a regular stream of crime statistics and expects them to adjust their strategies accordingly. They must explain their decisions to McCarthy and other police brass at weekly CompStat meetings.

“I’ve seen a real shift in the commanders as far as being proactive, understanding what’s happening, getting to the root of it and taking steps to put those strategies in place to prevent the next shooting,” McCarthy said. “That’s satisfying, but the numbers won’t be for a long time.”

McCarthy said he does not blame Englewood Police Cmdr. Anthony Carothers for the big spike in murders in that district.

“Tony Carothers has done a decent job since I’ve been here. He’s done a better job as we’ve gone along,” the superintendent said.

In the New Year, the department will boost its efforts to reduce crime in Englewood and the Harrison District on the West Side, McCarthy said.

The idea is to shut down open-air drug markets and keep officers on those blocks to prevent narcotics customers from coming back. Commanders will work with leaders from churches, community groups and other city departments to clean up territory seized from drug gangs, McCarthy said.

Lurigio, the Loyola professor, said he generally supports McCarthy’s moves, including shifting more officers to the patrol division.

“It’s good to have more police involved heavily in the community with more face time on a regular basis,” he said. “We’re seeing pretty good crime statistics. The numbers are going down.”

One of this year’s crime trends is perplexing, though.

While murders decreased about 2 percent citywide, the number of shooting victims was down about 4 percent and shooting “incidents” were down about 5 percent this year through Tuesday, McCarthy said.

In Englewood, where murders were up about 40 percent, shootings were up only 15 percent. “It’s a little frustrating we’re not down more in murders,” McCarthy said.

One explanation: in October and November, there was a spike in slayings that did not involve guns, McCarthy said. “As long as we reduce the shootings, the murders will eventually follow,” he said.

Meanwhile, Fraternal Order of Police President Mike Shields said officers should be proud that the city’s murder total did not rise this year.
“I hope the city remembers this at the time the city negotiates a new contract,” Shields said. “Police officers are working harder than ever with less.”